

Ben Jonson and the Jonsonian Afterglow: Imagemes, Avatars, and Literary Reception

(for Bent Sørensen)

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How is it that, life over, the literary images and remains of authors manage to shore themselves up against the currents of an uncertain fate? What are the forces which promote the retention or resurfacing of authorial representations or writings at certain periods in literary history and what leads to their cultural neglect or disremembering? In approaching the first set of questions through the lens of Roger D. Sell's communicational theory one might want to focus on the author and text as agents in the formation of different communities of readership or reception.¹ Or on, say, literary gossip as a medium of transmission.² And in approaching the second set of questions using the tools and techniques of cultural imagology—particularly, as we shall see later, through the notions of *imageme* and *avatar*—one might at least begin to venture some suggestions as to how the dynamics of the relation between community, text and authorial image maps out in practice.³

¹ See particularly, Roger D. Sell, *Literature as Communication: The Foundations of Mediating Criticism* (Amsterdam, 2000), *Mediating Criticism: Literary Education Humanized* (Amsterdam, 2001), and the introduction to Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (eds), *Writing and Religion in England, 1558-1689: Studies in Community-making and Cultural Memory* (Aldershot, 2008).

² For a communicational framing of literary gossip, see Roger D. Sell—"Literary Gossip, Literary Theory, Literary Pragmatics", in Roger D. Sell and Peter Verdonk (eds), *Literature and the New Interdisciplinarity: Poetics, Linguistics, History* (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 221-41—whose opening gambit is that "by participating in gossip" about authors, "we are actually making a world, and negotiating our own position within it, a position which has to be for ever explored, confirmed, and shifted when necessary" (p. 221).

³ On imagological approaches developed in the present chapter, see Peter Firchow, "The Nature and Uses of Imagology", in Mario J. Valdéz (ed.), *Towards a Theory of Comparative Literature* (New York, 1990), pp. 135-42;

By definition all authors, of course, are different: offering a distinctive textual output which is to some extent marked by the cultural, temporal and geographical specificity of its creation. (Hence, even a plagiarist like Robert Baron (1630-1658) may be distinguished from the texts he has copied by a displacement—a subset of what we might venture to call *portability*—which imbues their reinscription into a new cultural and historical context with its own particular qualities.)⁴ In selecting the poet, dramatist and masque-maker Ben Jonson (1572-1637) as a case in point for an investigation of this kind, I am choosing a figure whose afterglow (unlike that of a man like Baron) is still widely discernable in contemporary Anglophone culture. People may not be able to remember any of his works, or even to know when they are citing or singing his words; and his identity may have been partially occluded by the involvement of his namesake in one of the major sporting scandals of the twentieth century. But Jonson is still a name to be reckoned with in contemporary culture: whether on pub-signs, in school-room stories or jokes, in logos and fliers, or in the world of contemporary drama (where his influence may still be widely felt, and where a number of his plays are still performed in settings as far afield as America, Africa or Finland).⁵ In what follows, I will accordingly raise up his spectre and

Anthony W. Johnson, “Notes Towards a New Imagology”, *European English Messenger* 14 (2005) 50-8 and “New Methodologies: Imagology, Language, and English Philology”, in H. Antila et al. (eds) *Linguistic Topics and Language Teaching* (Oulu, 2006), pp. 7-27; Joep T. Leerssen, “Echoes and Images: Reflections upon Foreign Space”, in Raymond Corbey and Leerssen (eds), *Alterity, Identity, Image: Selves and Others in Society and Scholarship* (Amsterdam, 1991), pp. 123-138; Leerssen, “The Rhetoric of National Character: A Programmatic Survey”, *Poetics Today* 21 (2000) 267-92; Leerssen and K.U. Syndram (eds), *Europa Provincia Mundi* (Amsterdam, 1992); and M. Spiering, *Englishness: Foreigners and Images of National Identity in Postwar Literature* (Amsterdam, 1992).

⁴ For Robert Baron, see Charles R. Forker, “Robert Baron’s Use of Webster, Shakespeare, and Other Elizabethans”, *Anglia: Zeitschrift für Englische Philologie* 83 (1965) 176-98.

⁵ Perhaps the most significant recent text on Jonson’s recent theatrical influence is Brian Wooland (ed.) *Jonsonians: Living Traditions* (Aldershot, 2003), which offers chapters not only on contemporary performances of Jonson’s plays and the dramatic heritage of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century “Sons” and “Daughters” of Ben, but also takes on the question of Jonson’s influence in

examine just a few of the myriad refractions that it has cast into the new millennium. Before we turn to examine his afterglow, however, we need to have a fairly detailed grasp of some of the key images of the poet that have come to us from his life and texts.

Few creative lives of the English Renaissance are as well documented as that of Ben Jonson. From the surviving official papers alone it is possible to reconstruct not only a large number of the mundane details concerning his domestic life—his apprenticeship to the building trade, marriage, children, appointment as Chronologer to the City of London and so on—but also a record of civic misdemeanours: fines for non-attendance at church, or imprisonment at various different times for writing subversive literature, for murder, and for debt. From the accounts of contemporaries (friends and detractors alike) there is abundant testimony to the forcefulness of his personality, to his formidable scholarship, to his opinions on various subjects, to his foibles, excesses and felicities.⁶

relation to the plays of John Arden, Joe Orton, Peter Barnes, Caryl Churchill, and Alan Ayckbourn (not to mention his presence in cinematic thought from Preston Sturges and Eisenstein to Mamet). Wooland's *Ben Jonson and Theatre: Performance, Practice and Theory* (London, 1999), edited in collaboration with Richard Cave and Elizabeth Schafer, also provides a wealth of information on recent performances. For a useful survey of Ben Jonson on the twentieth-century stage, see Lois Potter, "The Swan Song of the Stage Historian", in Martin Butler (ed.), *Re-Presenting Ben Jonson: Text, History, Performance* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 193-209. For Jonson in Africa see, for instance, Martin Banham's *A History of Theatre in Africa* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 152; or the account of *Phiri* (an African jazz musical of the 1970s "which placed Ben Jonson's Volpone in a township setting"), presented online at http://www.southafrica.info/ess_info/sa_glance/culture/926389.htm. The most recent Jonsonian production in Finland has been *The Alchemist*, March 2007, in Turku City Theatre: on which, see Toni Lehtinen's review "Salatieteitä, väärennöksiä, ja valepukuja: Alkemisti olisi pitänyt jättää naftaliiniin" ["Occult science, forgery and deceit: *The Alchemist* should have been left in its mothballs"], *Turun Sanomat*, 30.03.2007, p. 27, and Anthony W. Johnson's rejoinder, "Alkemisti Turussa", *Turun Sanomat*, 21.4.2007, p. 23.

⁶ The fullest archive of Jonsonian life materials remains the monumental edition of Ben Jonson's works edited by C.H. Herford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11

The Ben bequeathed by history is, however, multifaceted rather than monolithic. One aspect of his personality—which certainly helps to explain the extent and precision of the military imagery in his work (as well as the bravado and bellicosity)—may be found in the story of Jonson as a young soldier in the Netherlands, challenging and killing his enemy in single combat within sight of the two assembled armies. This pock-marked aggressor with one eye slightly larger than the other, a bad temper and a sharp tongue is a figure you would only mess with at your peril, as the poet Marston found when (in the heat of a quarrel) the enraged Jonson beat him and took his pistol; or as the actor Gabriel Spencer discovered when he duelled with Ben in Hogsden Fields and got himself killed (despite having, as Jonson later boasted, a sword ten inches longer than his adversary). Little wonder, with a hard-edged reputation like this, that a Victorian versifier like W.C. Bennett could fête him beside Spenser and Beaumont (those supreme fabricators of the national epos) in his own fiercely nationalistic poem “Our Glory Roll” (1868).⁷

Not entirely unrelated to the braggart soldier is the image of Jonson the brawler and tavern-goer.⁸ History glimpses him in dispute with one

vols (Oxford, 1925-52), abbreviated in the main body of the text to H&S, followed by volume, page, and (where necessary) line numbers. The chief sources of materials for re-constructing Jonson’s life may be found in H&S I and II: with important additions in IX (including a stage history of the plays), the commentaries in volumes IX-XI, and the collection of primary texts documenting Jonson’s literary record in XI. The collection also includes a transcript of Ben Jonson’s comments to William Drummond (H&S I, pp. 128-78) – perhaps the main source for subsequent biographical gossip on the poet’s life – hereafter cited in the main text as “Drummond” (followed by page numbers). Other important observations and materials alluded to in the three following paragraphs may be found in W. David Kay, *Ben Jonson: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke, 1995), Rosalind Miles, *Ben Jonson: His Life and Work* (London, 1986), and David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

⁷ William Cox Bennett, *Contributions to a Ballad History of England and the States Sprung from Her* (London, 1868), p. 127.

⁸ This resonates with the championship of the underdog which has been so popular at certain times in British history. By contrast, the absence of such biographical data on Shakespeare has perhaps facilitated attempts to elevate him to the aristocracy as a Bacon, a de Vere, or a Henry Neville.

of the Earl of Northampton's servants (an incident which was to cost him much disfavour in high places). It records his being thrown out of a Court entertainment for unruly behaviour. It recollects that when he was in France, as governor to Sir Walter Raleigh's son, he was dragged, dead drunk, round the streets in a cart by his pupil. And in a slightly more benign (though largely hearsay) set of descriptions which have had a pervasive effect on later visualizations of the poet, historical tradition has seen fit to watch him presiding over the circle of wits (including Shakespeare) who met to match their conversational skills in the Mermaid Tavern or (later) officiating in the meetings of the Apollo Club at the Devil Tavern. Here, Jonsonian mythology tends to run wild. For Jonson is known to have passed time in the company of the intelligentsia of the age: lawyers, antiquarians, historians and philosophers such as John Selden, William Camden, Sir Robert Cotton, or Sir Francis Bacon. He was on friendly terms with writers like Donne, Shakespeare and Lady Mary Wroth. And he collaborated with other leading figures in the arts of the period: including the painter and architect, Inigo Jones, or musicians such as Alphonso Ferrabosco II and Nicholas Lanier. For some minds (especially those of nineteenth-century commentators), the desire to image different constellations of these luminaries sitting in a pub exchanging views on art and the world was well-nigh irresistible, and Ben is frequently figured in such texts as an amiable master of ceremonies, wreathed in laurel with a goblet in hand. These representations of a Jonson who increasingly resembled a wine-barrel as he aged—becoming, in his own words, a “Tun” of a man⁹—drew much of their power from the fact that they made him into a sort of living embodiment of the Bacchic, or Dionysian spirit, with all the positive as well as negative energy that such an identification entails.

Far more down to earth are the images of Jonson the Londoner that have retained at least some of their outline through the palimpsest of history. Westminster born and bred, Ben survives in some traces as a figure worthy of inclusion in his own city comedies. Unhappily married himself (and, indeed, estranged from his wife in the early years of the Jacobean period), he is known to have been caught in adultery by a city merchant and colluded with another in the seduction of the latter's own spouse. On one occasion he risked his well-being by flirting dangerously

⁹ H&S VII, p. 227, l. 6.

with the wife of a nobleman; on another (as he admitted himself), he dressed up in the long gown and white beard of an astrologer in order to fool a lady who came to meet him by the dim light of a candle in a little room in the suburbs. Yet despite these colourful tales (and many more like them), the surviving records also yield a number of more humdrum (although no less interesting) activities, such as accounts relating to his career as a bricklayer. Although this trade proved to be a useful financial fallback in his early years as a fledgling dramatist, its status appears to have been somewhat double-edged to Jonson. For his own father (who died in May 1572, a month before his own birth) had been a clergyman, and Jonson may have felt that his mother, by taking Robert Brett the builder as her second husband, was marrying down. (Such an impression may have been compounded by the fact that the garden of their house in Hartshorn Lane, near Charing Cross, straddled one of the largest open sewers in London.)¹⁰

Whatever the case, it is clear that as far as his contemporaries were concerned bricklaying, for good or ill, was an important Jonsonian marker. As early as 1601/1602, for example, a character aptly named Ingenioso, in a play performed at St John's College, Cambridge, countered the claim by his friend, Judicio, that "*Benjamin*" was the "wittiest fellow of a Bricklayer in England" with the retort that, on the contrary, the playwright was "so slow an Inventor, that he were better betake himself to his old trade of Bricklaying; a bold whoreson, as confident now in making of a book, than he was in times past in laying of a brick".¹¹ After the failure of Jonson's tragedy *Catiline* in 1611, a minor satirist by the name of Henry Parrot composed a malicious epigram exhorting Jonson to take off his "Buskins" (the boots traditionally worn by tragic actors), "And Mortar tread with thy disdained shanks".¹² After the mixed reception of Jonson's Court masque, *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* in 1618, one of the viewers, Nathaniel Brent, observed that "diverse think fit he should return to his old trade of bricklaying again".¹³ And after the disastrous first performance of Jonson's comedy *The Magnetic Lady* in 1632, the young Alexander Gill felt free to offer the

¹⁰ For this aspect of Jonson's experience, see Bruce Thomas Boehrer, *The Fury of Men's Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal* (Philadelphia, 1997).

¹¹ H&S XI, p. 364.

¹² H&S XI, p. 379.

¹³ H&S X, p. 576.

indulgence of his advice to the sixty-year-old playwright—suggesting that the latter might find more solace in the “Brickhill” than the stage, and that he would be better equipped to lay the foundations of a building than the plot or groundwork of play. “Fall then to work, In thy old Age again”, jeered Gill, “Take up thy Trug and Trowel, gentle *Ben*”.¹⁴ Among Jonson’s detractors the association with bricklaying had stuck, to be invoked whenever he seemed to falter in his art.

For the most part these “hits” at Jonson depended on simple social snobbery and a few stock devices for their effect. Yet they did have an effect, and we may feel a certain sympathy for John Taylor the Water Poet, when he devoted some space in his 1637 elegy on the death of Jonson to a neat inversion of Gill’s lines. Even while Jonson was engaged in the bricklaying trade, Taylor argued, the transcendent rapture of the muses had circulated in his mind so that, “by their influences, learned Ben, / Laid by the *Trowel*, *Bricks* turned Books again”.¹⁵ Further, in reply to the likes of Ingenioso, Taylor reinvested the building metaphor with a new power by reversing the peculiar slippage of logic that equated rapidity of production with high quality. For Taylor, Ben’s “ingenuity was solid” from an early age (l. 139). He was “exact in *Geometric* skill. / Whereby he well knew *Architecture*’s grounds, / In pedestals, in Angles, *Squares*, or *Rounds*” (ll. 164-6). And “though they termed him slow, he still was sure” (ll. 196-204), creating verses that were “compacted” with “much maturity of *Wit* [...] and deep sounding sense”. Jonson, then, could be perceived by contemporaries as a literary architect as well a bricklayer, and his fabled slowness could be construed as a sign of craftsmanship and quality.

Later seventeenth century anecdotes—in which the young Jonson was spotted building Lincoln’s Inn in London, reciting Latin verses with a copy of Virgil in his pocket—may, however, alert us to another side of Jonson which seems to be at odds with the stereotypes of bricklayer, taverner, soldier or city slicker.¹⁶ Jonson in his time was widely

¹⁴ H&S XI, p. 348.

¹⁵ H&S XI, p. 426, ll. 179-80

¹⁶ For Jonsonian allusions and anecdotes, see particularly J.F. Bradley and J.Q. Adams, *The Jonson Allusion-Book* (New Haven, 1922), D.H. Craig, *Ben Jonson: The Critical Heritage, 1599-1798* (London, 1990), Robert C. Evans, “Jonsonian Allusions”, in *Re-Presenting Ben Jonson*, pp. 233-48; and Anthony

recognized as a classicist and scholar. According to the seventeenth-century antiquary John Aubrey, the Bishop of Oxford, John Skinner (himself no stranger to learning), avowed that Jonson “understood an Author as well as any man in England”, and the poet’s erudition—despite his lack of any University education—managed to win him the respect of many of the greatest minds of his generation. His portrait hung, for example, in the library of the antiquarian Sir Robert Cotton.¹⁷ John Selden, the noted jurist and scholar, was fulsome in Jonson’s praise, especially with respect to his memory and “curious” learning. It is clear that—in an age which respected the authority of the ancients and the models offered by classical antiquity—anyone with Jonson’s wide reading and facility in translation was at an advantage and that the classical world gave him not only a passport, but also a survival kit, to help him thrive in the contemporary world. Hence, James I’s wife, Anna of Denmark, appears to have asked Jonson to write scholarly notes on the sources of his court masques for the edification of herself and her son, Prince Henry. Hence, James I felt that he could trust Jonson to write a welcoming speech in Latin when his brother-in-law, Christian IV of Denmark, came to visit in 1606. By the same token, Jonson was able, at times, enjoy the patronage of the highest circles in English society, which included in its number magnates such as Lord Aubigny, Lady Bedford, the Cavendish family, the Earl of Salisbury, the Sidney and Herbert families, and Sir Francis Stewart. By the time of his decease in 1637, Ben had become a cultural icon in his own right.

Although it is by no means clear that there is a necessary relation between authorial images and the actual output of any particular writer, the Jonsonian personality in all its complexity is one which also impresses itself throughout his texts. It is there in his *English Grammar*, or the critical observations set down in his notebook, *Discoveries*. It is there in the annotated volumes remaining from his library, as well as in the handful of letters (mainly written in prison) which have come down to us. And it is there (at times, insistently so) in his more “fictional” works. For Jonson was pre-eminently a creator for specific occasions, and his surviving output of printed and manuscript work often conveys

W. Johnson, “Ben Jonson: An Ungathered Allusion”, *Notes and Queries* 33 (1986) 384-5.

¹⁷ For Aubrey, see H&S I, p. 179; and for Cotton’s library, see Kevin Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton 1586-1631* (Oxford, 1979), p. 84.

an extraordinary feeling of presence and authority, as if he were standing before us. It is a presence which is most noticeable in the three hundred or so poems and translations, thirty eight masques and entertainments that he left to posterity. But it may also be felt in his more explicitly dramatic production: his two extant tragedies and fourteen comedies (accompanied at times by provocative prefaces or epilogues), as well as a few collaborative efforts and fragments of other plays.

In its relation to biography, then, the case of Ben Jonson seems to run counter to the suggestion of the philosopher Martin Heidegger that in great art “the artist remains inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge”.¹⁸ Rather, Jonson’s poetic and dramatic creations tend to reinforce the passageway between artist and work so that, even if as little were known about his life as is known about, say, Shakespeare’s, a reading of the work would summon up a more tangible image of the man. In an age such as the present where the biographical relations between the writer and the work are often dismissed as a critical irrelevance, the surviving materials from Jonson’s life offer a salutary warning as to the richness of imaginative insight which would be lost by such a neglect.

Yet to say this—to insist on the importance of an understanding of biography for the reading of his work—is not the same as making a naïve causal connection between the two. If the criticism of the postmodern generation teaches anything it is that the “facts” of history are not simple, discrete, essences. Rather, they are interpretations of events by particular people at particular times (often for particular reasons). The Jonson who speaks from his texts—like the Jonson who removed an “h” from his name in order to gain some measure of distinctiveness—are equally *constructed* selves responding to, and asserting themselves against, the constructions of the world around them. What is remarkable here is not only the curious illusion of a unified voice—that compelling quality of Jonsonian *solidity*—which the writer has managed to sustain throughout so much of his work; but also the huge range of conflicting Jonsons

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry–Language–Thought*, tr. A. Hofstadter (New York, 1971; rpt. 1975), p. 40.

which appear when his self-constructions are re-examined in their biographical context.¹⁹

What is this quality which is such a distinctive feature of Jonsonian poetic *personae* (literally, “masks”), and what is its relation to biography? A story—which made its way into *The Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes*²⁰—and a well-known poem may help to frame the subject. In 1618, at the height of his fame, Ben walked from London to Edinburgh and, in Scotland, was entertained by the young poet Drummond of Hawthornden, who secretly recorded the table talk of his expansive, expensive and often drunken guest. Among the uneven, yet always intriguing, mass of gossip that Drummond managed to jot down was Jonson’s alarming account of his prescience regarding the death of his son. As Drummond put it:

When the King came in England, at that time the Pest was in London, he being in the Country at Sir Robert Cotton’s house with old Camden, he saw in a vision his eldest son (then a child and at London) appear unto him with the Mark of a bloody cross on his forehead as if it had been cutted with a sword, at which amazed he prayed unto God, and in the morning he came to Mr Camden’s chamber to tell him, who persuaded him it was but an apprehension of his fantasy at which he should not be disjected. In the meantime comes there letters from his wife of the death of that Boy in the plague. He appeared to him he said of a Manly shape and of that Growth that he thinks he shall be at the resurrection.

(Drummond, pp. 139-40)

¹⁹ On this quality of Jonson’s style, see especially Wesley Trimpi, *Ben Jonson’s Poems: A Study of the Plain Style* (Stanford, 1962), and G.A.E. Parfitt, *Ben Jonson: Public Poet and Private Man* (London, 1976); as well as Anthony W. Johnson “‘Angles, Squares, or Roundes’: Studies in Ben Jonson’s Vitruvianism”, Oxford D. Phil. thesis, 2 vols (1987), vol. 1, pp. 30-37.

²⁰ Ed. James Sutherland (1975; rpt. Oxford, 1981), pp. 22-3. Here it is accompanied by the tale of Ben and Raleigh’s son, as well as the story of how, on Jonson’s release from prison after *Eastward Ho!*, “his old mother drank to him, and shewed him a paper which she had (if the sentence had taken execution) to have mixed in the prison among his drink, which was full of lusty strong poison; and that she was no churl, she told him she minded first to have drunk of it herself” (p. 23). Whatever the truth value of this, it remains a rare contemporary account of Jonson’s familial relations, and one which has helped preserve the notion of an endearing mother-son relationship in the tissue of literary gossip which has moulded Jonson’s reputation. Stories such as this have helped to promote the sense of a Jonsonian empathy which is not always self-evident in the poet’s own writings.

The story is doubly disturbing: first, because it evokes the uncanny atmospherics of a gothic tale recounted in a Scottish castle on a dark and stormy night; and second, because—as an account of the death of his own son—it is unlikely that Jonson would have been tempted to fabricate the details. (In fact, as Ben also mentioned to his host, “of all styles he loved most to be called honest”,²¹ and he owned a hundred letters referring to him by that epithet.) But what is more remarkable is that in Jonson’s own poem on the passing of the child, published some two years before the meeting with Drummond, there appears (on a first glance, at least), to be hardly any trace of this extraordinary subjective experience:

On My First Son

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
 My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy,
 Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
 Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
 O, could I loose all father, now. For why
 Will man lament the state he should envy?
 To have so soon scaped world’s and flesh’s rage,
 And, if no other misery, yet age.
 Rest in soft peace, and, asked, say here doth lie
BEN. JONSON his best piece of poetry.
 For whose sake, henceforth, all his vows be such,
 As what he loves may never like too much.

(H&S, VIII, p. 41)

What is striking about this poem is its sense of propriety. Everything seems to belong. The poem is, in general terms, an epigram (that is, literally, *epi* + *gramma*, letters scratched or carved on something). But more specifically, it is an epitaph (*epi* + *taphos*, an inscription on a tomb). And as such, its six terse couplets unfold a sentiment which is entirely appropriate to the requirements of the form: a touching farewell by a father who recognizes the egotistical sin of too much emotional investment in his seven-year-old child and consoles himself with the realization that his son has gone to a better place. Rather than leading his reader into the psycho-drama of an actual visionary experience, however,

²¹ Drummond, p. 150.

Jonson has chosen to substitute a level and controlled speaking voice. It is a voice which achieves its effects as much by the withholding of feelings as by their expression: threatening to break down only in the middle—*O, could I loose* (i.e., lose; let loose) *all father now*—but recovering its rhythm to gain an added poignancy precisely in the triumphal mastery, and containment, of emotion that is witnessed by its final lines.²²

To the sensibilities of the twenty-first century, the idea of Jonson adopting a public *persona* to obscure his private emotions may seem a little calculating, theatrical, or even callous. But the classical training he received at Westminster School in his youth may well have encouraged such an approach (which, hence, would have seemed less alienating to his contemporary readers). It is not known how long Jonson was allowed to study before being taken from school and set to his step-father's trade of bricklaying, but it is almost certain that he remained in the system for long enough to sit through the third and fourth forms where he would have encountered, among other things, the discussion by Cicero (106-43 B.C.) of the idea of the *persona* in his influential work *On Duties* (*De officiis*). The Romans tended to think of life "perhaps more than we do, in terms of roles performed and the variety of *personae* adopted in differing circumstances";²³ and Cicero's work offers a prime example of the way the Romans thought in terms of the *persona* as an image presented to society, determined by the human condition but modified by social position and opportunity, individual ability and individual choice. This was a lesson which Jonson appears to have taken very much to heart—not only in the *personae* adopted by the characters in his plays (Face in his comedy, *The Alchemist*, is only the most obvious example) but also in the speaking voices of his poems, and also (perhaps) the roles adopted by Jonson himself in his life. "*Language* most shows a man", he wrote in *Discoveries* (echoing the humanist scholar Erasmus): "speak

²² For more detailed readings from this poem, see Stephen Booth, *Precious Nonsense* (Berkeley, 1998), pp. 66-100; and Anthony W. Johnson, "Levity and Gravity: Ben Jonson and the Crisis of the Image", in N. H. Petersen, Claus Clüver and Nicholas Bell (eds), *Signs of Change: Transformations of Christian Traditions and their Representation in the Arts, 1000-2000* (Amsterdam, 2004), pp. 51-67.

²³ Susanna Morton Braund, *The Roman Satirists and their Masks*, (London, 1996; rpt. 1999), p. 2.

that I may see thee”.²⁴ Yet despite the fact that, as he put it in his Latin gloss on the same passage, speech is the image of the soul (“*Oratio imago animi*”), it is equally clear that he knew that the image itself was a construction: that the language which showed the man or imaged the soul was, to some extent at least, a matter of individual projection and choice.

Although, moreover, Jonson’s success in creating a formidable image of himself as a classical scholar undoubtedly contributed in large measure to his position in the courtly and intellectual *milieu* of his contemporaries, its effect on his literary reputation was by no means benign. For that “perfect conspiracy of approval”—which, as the poet T.S. Eliot so shrewdly observed, had led Jonson, by the early twentieth century, to be more revered than read—owed much to what minds familiar with (and to some extent resistant to) the classicism of eighteenth-century enlightenment culture, may have seemed too closed, too self-assured, too carefully scripted, and too backward looking.²⁵ This is doubly ironic in Jonson’s case, as he was anything but fixed in his relation to the classics. Rather, in a manner reminiscent of that of his great contemporary Montaigne, he approached the texts of the ancient authors in the same way as an adventurer would encounter the provisional maps of those who had gone before—*tanquam explorator*, as Jonson had it in his motto. That is, he tended to use them as guides rather than commanders; invoking the past to comprehend the present at the same time as he pushed his own work on into uncharted territory.

One previously unnoticed resurfacing of this formidably classical image may be found in the *Orationes* of George Lovejoy in the archive of Canterbury Cathedral: a manuscript which represents one of the most substantial unpublished sources of school drama from the later seventeenth century.²⁶ In one of the entertainments transcribed there (fols

²⁴ H&S VIII, p. 625, ll. 2031-2.

²⁵ T.S. Eliot, “Ben Jonson” [1919], in *Elizabethan Dramatists* (London 1963; rpt. 1968), p. 67.

²⁶ Lit. MS E41. The *Orationes* Project is an interdisciplinary initiative instigated by myself and Jyri Vaahtera (Professor of Classical Philology at Turku University) in order to edit this important unpublished manuscript and bring it into the scholarly arena. The *Orationes* was collected (and, in part, composed) by George Lovejoy (c. 1675), the Headmaster of the King’s School, Canterbury, after the English Civil War. As well as containing previously unnoticed manuscript adaptations of certain pre-war plays by major authors (such as James

[“171-183b”]), the students perform a dramatized version of the entirety of Horace’s *Art of Poetry* in Latin, followed by a short “Discourse” in English between two scholars—the privileged “Will” and the commoner “Dan”—in which the former learns the error of his plutocratic ways. The importance of Jonson for the passage is that he had produced two translations of the poem (and had, himself, been strongly identified with Horace by contemporaries), so that he is game for an allusion.²⁷ Hence, having mocked Dan and his class for their frugal lifestyles and meagre provisions, Will remarks that

thy plump cheeks, though they haue no Ben Johnson’s belly, nor judicious great head
De arte Poetica, yet give that contumelious slander the lye to their teeth that made it.
Sed pono Tigillinum.

Nam galeatum sero duelli
Paenitet. Experiar quid somedatur in illos
Quorum Flaminia tegitur cinis, atq[ue] Latina.

(fol. [“182^b”])

Here, the Jonsonian body and intellect are combined with a firm association with the Latin wits: the citation being from the closing lines of Juvenal’s first *Satire* to the effect that, having abandoned the contemporary as a subject for mockery, the poet will direct himself against the dead.²⁸

Shirley’s *Honoria and Mammon*), the volume includes a number of works written in English and Latin by the Scholars (and staff) of the King’s School which celebrate the Restoration of Charles II to power, re-enact the Gunpowder Plot which nearly destroyed his grandfather, and discuss a wide range of topical issues (from the teaching of classics and grammar in the Restoration, or an enactment of verbal sparring between popular poets such as Ben Jonson and Richard Lovelace (see below), to an alchemical allegory of the politics of state).

²⁷ From a huge amount of writing on this subject, particularly relevant texts for present purposes are: Robert B. Pierce, “Ben Jonson’s Horace and Horace’s Ben Jonson”, *Studies in Philology* 71 (1981) 20-31, and Edward Blakeney’s edition, *Horace on the Art of Poetry: Latin Text, English Prose Translation, introd. And notes, together with Ben Jonson’s English Verse Rendering* (London, 1928).

²⁸ In the Loeb translation the passage runs: “‘...the helmet once donned, it is too late to repent you of the battle.’ Then I will try what I may say of those worthies whose ashes lie under the Flaminian and Latin roads.” Juvenal, *Satire 1*, in *Juvenal and Persius*, tr. G.G. Ramsay (Cambridge, Mass., 1918; rpt. 1969), p. 16, ll. 169-71. This clearly leads Will to reflect on Jonson’s own rejection of the

However, Jonson's own annotations suggest that much of his own scholarship may have been directed at restoring more complete images of the poets of the ancient world for the living. Even when we catch him pedantically cross-checking his copy of Martial's Latin epigrams in order to correct any mistakes and omissions, the activity is, in fact, simultaneously interpretable in this light. For by restoring Martial as completely as possible—and writing in, for instance, the obscene passages that prudish editors had cut out from the text—Jonson was striking out against authorial censorship; and there is evidence to suggest that, once restored, such texts were then shared by Jonson with scholars who might not have had access to the same resources.²⁹ Beyond this—and despite his almost obsessive regard for the details of the classical worlds which he was to re-create in plays such as *Sejanus* or *Catiline*, or an entertainment such as the *Masque of Augurs*—there was another level at which Jonson's engagement with antiquity was a question of pure fantasy; as is witnessed by the poet's confession to Drummond that he spent entire nights imagining the Romans and the Carthaginians battling around his big toe.³⁰ In calling him "curious", then, and emphasizing Jonson's attraction to the strangeness of the classics, Selden had put his finger on what, from the earliest days in his career, had formed an important motive for Jonson's reading.

Behind the transformation of Ben the schoolboy and Ben the would-be bricklayer into Ben the scholar looms the figure of William Camden himself: the man to whom Jonson had come for advice on how to interpret his dream. Camden had almost certainly been Jonson's schoolmaster at Westminster. But in addition to academic guidance, his role may well have been more like that a surrogate father than that of a mere pedagogue; for he had, it seems, been a friend of Jonson's own

popular stage in his Horatian "Ode to Himself" and to ponder (paraphrasing Jonson): "I think it would doe better / If Poets, and Actors would quit the stage / Of this so ronchous, & nasutious age" [fol. 182^b].

²⁹ For this, see Riggs, *Jonson* p. 191—who explains how Jonson consulted Daniel Heinsius' copy of Peter Scriverius' unexpurgated edition of Martial at Leiden in 1613, in order to help Thomas Farnaby back in England to restore the excised passages in his own edition. Such acts (accompanied by Farnaby's recognition of his labours) undoubtedly contributed to the consolidation of Jonson's scholarly reputation amongst his peers.

³⁰ Drummond, p. 141.

father (who had died a month before the poet's birth), and may even have paid for Ben's education. What, then, did Camden give Jonson? First, he would have offered a grounding in the ancient languages—an everyday familiarity with Latin, an acquaintance with Greek, as well as also, possibly, some knowledge of Hebrew. Second, as Jonson recalled to Drummond, Camden taught him to write poems—blocking out his ideas in prose before he cast them into verse. In this respect, his mentor encouraged Jonson as a *maker*—a constructor—of poetry: imparting an important pre-Romantic attitude to the craft which may have led Jonson to reflect more than he might otherwise have done on the formal structure and genre of his final product. And third, Camden was in his own right an international scholar. He was an expert on onomastics—the naming of things—and a historian who was able to trace the history of Britain through its etymologies and its artefacts. Yet equally, he was a European: part of a contemporary movement at the cutting edge of continental scholarship—a man capable of pointing Jonson towards the literatures of different ethnic traditions (especially via the neo-Latin which afforded a key to intercultural communication in that period), in order to gain the maximum from his experience. (Jonson, in turn, was to enshrine his mentor—“to whom I owe / All that I am in arts, all that I know”—in one of his finest epigrams.)³¹

There was, moreover, nothing stultifying in this exposure to contemporary continental writing, especially as Jonson approached it. Rather, the image of Jonson the European which we are able to trace from surviving his books and annotations suggests that his readings in the field led him to encounter high-level treatments of risqué, erotic or scatological themes which had a much lower profile in vernacular English Literature.³² In neo-Latin, for instance, he came across the famous *Basia*, or “kiss” sonnets, of Johannes Secundus; in Italian he appears to have waded his way through romances such as the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*—commonly translated as *The Strife of Love in a Dream*—curious erotic fantasy attributed to the shadowy Francisco Colonna. And in French, Jonson seems to have studied François

³¹ H&S VIII, p. 31, ll. 1-2.

³² Indeed, this edge in Jonson's writing may have contributed (paradoxically for a writer with such command of the vernacular) with the quality of “foreignness” which some critics have found in his work: especially when comparing him with Shakespeare. A case in point is Thomas Carlyle (see note 40, below).

Rabelais' outrageous *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, incorporating it into his thinking long before its first translation into English. The evidence for the latter assertion may be found in the British Library—where Jonson's copy still survives: copiously annotated in the margins with Jonson's characteristic hand and flower signs beside important passages as well as, on occasion, heavily glossed sections where Jonson translates words or phrases from French into English or Latin. Many of these—as Anne Lake Prescott makes clear in her excellent discussion of French dictionaries available to Jonson—must date from after the publication of Randle Cotgrave's 1611 lexicon,³³ but the fact that several are underlain by hurried (and possibly less selective) marks in lead suggests that Jonson may have gone for a rapid reading of the text at some earlier point in his career and come back for a more leisurely consideration later.

Jonson's highlighted passages include some pretty down-market narrative moments. Over the first twenty-one chapters of the story of the young giant Gargantua (which are heavily marked in the British Museum copy), Jonson may be watched coming to terms with some of Rabelais' less savoury descriptions, such as those in the chapter where the five-year-old Gargantua "proves" his intelligence to his superiors by discoursing over five pages about his experiments in search of the perfect object with which to wipe his rear end (Book I, pp. 41-5). At first, Gargantua reports, he tried soft things, such as a lady's velvet mask (*vn cachelet de velours d'une Damoiselle*). (This is a phrase Jonson pays careful attention to, underlining *cachelet* and translating it as a *masque*.) And then he confesses to having moved into a more painful area, swabbing himself on a gilt-spangled knobbly neckerchief (a *cachecol*); a cat (which understandably took revenge by clawing him where it hurt); and a variety of abrasive plants which eventually gave him the bloody-flux of Lombardy (*le caque-sangue de Lombard*), an ailment that the young Giant is only able to cure by cleaning himself with his codpiece. Throughout the passage Jonson hangs on, underlining studiously. And he follows, too (glossing meticulously) as Gargantua breaks into excremental verse in a variety of increasingly elaborate forms before coming to the conclusion that the best object for a good wipe is the

³³ Anne Lake Prescott, *Imagining Rabelais in Renaissance England* (New Haven), p. 54. The comments in the following paragraph are derived from my examination of Jonson's copy of Rabelais' *Oeuvres* (Lyons, 1599) in the British Library.

downy neck of a goose held between the legs (*que d' vn oison bien dumeté*: an expression which Jonson takes due notice of, underscoring *dumeté* and adding the word *col*—neck—above the line). The point about all of this is not really one of prurience, but rather of excess. Like James Joyce (or Jonathan Swift), Rabelais was a writer who refused to let himself be constrained by the norms of polite society. His subject bursts its bounds, accepting a wider slice of life than has been customary for most authors (before or since), so that the verbal exuberance of the work becomes not so much a gesture towards obscenity as a celebration of the freedom to transcend the limiting *mores* of everyday life. For Jonson—raised on the more sober fare of the classics at Westminster School (and taught, of course, in Latin)—Rabelais offered a model of what was possible in the vernacular (where the rules of writing were not, as yet, fixed), as a model of exuberance (as well as of the subversive possibilities of writing): suggestions which were to leave their mark on his best work. Perhaps then, it is unsurprising that shards of the earthy Jonson emerge from time to time in his literary afterglow. In the King's School manuscript once again (in another previously unnoticed Jonsonian allusion), the poet is, for instance, imaged engaging in a poetic “flyting” with that hero of mid-seventeenth-century royalist poetics Richard Lovelace. The idea of the bellicose Jonson engaging in such poetic sparring is nothing new to his literary heritage, as is demonstrated by the well-known verse battle (frequently ascribed to Jonson's authorship) in which he locks poetic horns with George Wither.³⁴ But here, with perhaps an appeal to the schoolboy humour of George Lovejoy's adolescent actors, a poem emerges which (once the Latin has been parsed) barely passes muster. “Tell me”, asks an arrogant Jonson, “what stream usually goes up the mountain? If you do not solve this for me, you will be vanquished” (“*Dic mihi quod flumen soleat conscendere montes? / Hoc mihi, ni solvas, tu superatus eris*”). To which the triumphant Lovelace responds: “It is urine that always spreads the bad odours” (“*Est urina malos quæ semper fundit odores*”).³⁵ *Touché*.

However, among the images of the man surviving from the end of his life there is, sadly enough, a fair degree of uniformity. In 1623,

³⁴ H&S VIII, pp. 439-43.

³⁵ Lit. MS E.41, [fol. “124”^{sb}]. I am very grateful to Professor Jyri Vaahtera for his help with the translation.

Jonson's possessions, along with most of his library, were destroyed in a fire, and he seems to have made ends meet by lodging and lecturing at Gresham College in London. Effectively displaced from court life in 1625 by the accession of Charles I and his Queen, Henrietta Maria—who were both eager to surround themselves with younger talent—Jonson found that his troubles were compounded. Overweight, perhaps too prone to drink, embittered and living on an insubstantial pension, he was forced back into playwriting in order to survive—even beyond the stroke of 1628 which left him, for the most part, bedridden. Vulnerable, Jonson became easy prey to the glib formulations of the poetasters of the period, as is witnessed by the following little-known poem (which survives among the Portland Papers in Nottingham University):

Big Benjamin hath had a cup of sack
So often at his mouth that now his back
Is almost broke; whereas if he his cup
In his sack's mouth had closely tied up;
He might have had a blessing, and have bin
As fortunate, as little Benjamin.
Though he be broke, and broke, and broke in twain
The Parliament hath pieced him up again.
(Pw V 1241)

Clumsiness aside, these lines pack their punch. The poem, as Hilton Kelliher has shown, was penned by one Dr Andrews, physician to Jonson's last great patron, William Cavendish, the Earl of Newcastle, and in such a context it does not seem unlikely that "Big Benjamin", with his cup of canary wine ("sack"), is a representation of the poet in his later years to complement (by his own confession), a mountain belly and craggy face. But at the same time, the first five lines of the poem evoke the Biblical story of Benjamin—in his role as Joseph's brother in Genesis (44:2)—whose cup, concealed in a sack, eventually led to the atonement of the sons of Jacob. At its most basic level, then, Andrews's meaning seems fairly clear: if Jonson had refrained from so much drinking, his world might have shown him more benevolence. However, there is more to the poem than that. For, as Kelliher has observed, the expression "little Benjamin" alludes to the tribe of Benjamin in Psalm 68

and to the blessing of God in the congregations.³⁶ If, then, the Genesis reference applies to Jonson, we may be justified in suspecting that a second referent is covered by the second allusion. Because, moreover, the expression “Tribe of Ben” or “Sons of Ben” was used in the period to designate Jonson’s followers in the period immediately after his death, we may wonder whether the second Benjamin (if he could be found), would be associated with that group. As it happens, such a candidate does present himself—in a context which gives an added poignancy to Andrews’s lines.

Benjamin Rudyerd was Jonson’s friend and exact contemporary. Trained as a lawyer, he had shared Jonson’s circle when they were in their twenties. In particular, he had mixed with John Hoskins (whom Jonson later called his literary “father”), and wrote an important account of student festivities—the revels of *Le Prince d’Amour*—which were presented at the Inns of Court in 1597-8. As well as being a minor poet, Rudyerd was the recipient of three flattering epigrams published by Jonson in his 1616 Folio (*Epig.* CXX, CXXI, CXXII). And later, in the 1620s, Rudyerd embarked on an outstanding Parliamentary career (which helped to bolster up the more variable results of his investments in venture capital). What Andrews appears to be doing then, is to invoke a warm friendship from Jonson’s youth as a moral lesson: playing off a wry satire of Rudyerd’s ascendance over the parliaments of 1625, 1626 and 1628/9 against a bitter testimony to Jonson’s decline through the same period. Andrews cannot have known it (as he died in 1633), but Rudyerd (who was a staunch supporter of the Presbyterian cause) did go on to fulfil his role as “little Benjamin” in the congregations. Nor could he have known how his closing lines would so ominously anticipate the Humpty Dumpty rhyme of the king whose rift with Parliament became so acute that nothing—despite Rudyerd’s best efforts—could piece it up again. For Jonson, however, what Rudyerd came to term the “Crisis of

³⁶ Kelliher, “Donne, Jonson”, p. 160. For a further adversarial example from the mid-century which plays on Jonson’s reputation for alcohol consumption, see “An Epigram, To his Friend Ben Jonson, upon his Libellous Verses against the Lords of the Green-Cloath concerning his Sack”, in John Eliot’s *Poems consisting of Epistles and Epigrams, Satyrs, Epitaphs and Elogies, Songs and Sonets* ... (London, 1658), p. 26. For positive appropriations of his interest in sack, see the poems and translations of Alexander Brome, Shakerley Marmion and Thomas Randolph reprinted in H&S XI, pp. 360-61.

Parliaments", the Civil War and the execution of Charles I were a nightmare he would never have to face. On August 16th, 1637 the man whose verse had done so much to immortalize so many people—including friends like Shakespeare, Donne, Camden and Rudyerd himself—died, largely neglected and tended only by a solitary housekeeper.

Neglected, but not forgotten. One of the almost biblical ironies of Andrews's poem is that, although (as far as we know) he outlived all of his children, Jonson's reputation quickly prospered under the watchful eye of his literary followers (his self-appointed "Sons" and "Daughters"). Within six months of his death, and burial in Westminster Abbey, some thirty-three of the former got together to publish a volume of elegies, *Jonsonus Virbius*, in his honour. The epithet *Virbius*—as Ian Donaldson reminds us³⁷—meant "twice a man", in reference to the legend of Hippolytus, who was revived under that name at the behest of the goddess Diana after he had been torn apart by wild horses; and likewise, the tributes of the Sons of Ben to their mentor sought to restore him in all his complex glory. The Jonsonian afterglow (whether or not it has been accompanied by a reading of his poetry, drama and prose), has now lasted for more than three hundred years and shows little sign of abating. In what follows, I would therefore like to turn to examine the workings of at least one of the means which have enabled the appeal of the writer and his work to remain so enduring.

How can posterity cope with such a plural image? As the work of Joep Leerssen has tended to suggest, one answer may lie in the idea of the *imageme*: a sort of complex stereotypical blueprint which embodies the binarisms and contradictions which are implicit in representations of national difference. For Leerssen, national images

... are typically characterized by their inherent ambivalent polarity. An *imageme* is the bandwidth of discursively established character attributes concerning a given nationality and will take the form of the ultimate cliché, which is current for virtually all nations: *nation X is a nation of contrasts*. Thus, Ireland's *imageme*

³⁷ Ian Donaldson, *Jonson's Magic Houses: Essays in Interpretation* (Oxford, 1997), p. 1.

might be that of nonrational ebullience (be it in sentimental song or mindless aggression), Germany's that of a penchant for systematic abstractions (be it in the form of metaphysical systems or organizational efficiency).

National imagemes are defined by their Janus-faced ambivalence and contradictory nature. They define a polarity within which a given national character is held to move. As a result of their ambivalent polarity, their various manifestations (national images such as we actually encounter them) are highly impervious to historical obsolescence or desuetude.³⁸

It seems to me that when the images generated by the life and work of an individual author undergo a wide diaspora, and are experienced on a wide variety of levels, then the structures which determine the formation of national imagemes may also begin to come into play. This would certainly seem to be true of that small cache of authors—including Dante, Goethe and Shakespeare—who have reached some level of recognition at a global level. And it may have become relevant for the case of Jonson partly because of his widespread popularity during his lifetime and partly because a large tract of his literary history derives from his consequent pairing—as a *hetero-image*: the “other” “great man” of the age—with Shakespeare. Hence, much of the afterglow of Jonson is the history of a binarism: looming large in studies (such as Jonathan Bate's) of Shakespeare's apotheosis into National poet, while Shakespeare (as Donaldson has so clearly shown) has tended to play a usurping role in equivalent attempts to map out the trajectory of Jonson's reputation across the centuries.³⁹ On this level Shakespeare is quite palpably what Jonson is not: swift where Jonson is slow; light where Jonson is weighty; natural where Jonson is bookish; spontaneous where

³⁸ Leerssen, “Rhetoric of National Character”, p. 279.

³⁹ See especially G.E. Bentley, *Shakespeare and Jonson: Their Reputations in the Seventeenth Century Compared*, 2 vols (Chicago, 1945), Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London, 1997), Ian Donaldson, ““Not of an Age”: Jonson, Shakespeare, and the Verdicts of Posterity”, in James Hirsch (ed.), *New Perspectives on Ben Jonson* (Cranbury, 1997), pp. 197-214 – as well as “Jonson and the Tother Youth”, in his collection of essays *Jonson's Magic Houses*, pp. 6-25 – Richard Dutton, “Jonson and Shakespeare”, in *Ben Jonson: Authority: Criticism* (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 140-62; and Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, “Jonson's Reputation”, in their *Ben Jonson Revised* (New York, 1999), pp. 238-42.

Jonson is laboured.⁴⁰ The Jonson who did so much for the afterlife of Shakespeare's image—not only through his contribution towards the dedication to, and compilation of, the 1623 Folio but also through his personal (and somewhat critical) testimony to the working methods of Shakespeare as a man he knew—unwittingly helped to create the Aristophanic counter-weight which would devalue his own poetic worth.⁴¹

What makes imagemes work is not, of course, the theory so much as the different communities of use which emphasize the different elements available within the phenomenon. Although, for instance, the Shakespeare/Jonson binarism is at times an almost overwhelming factor in the literary record of the latter, at other times the two names may be combined—as a sort of metonymic cipher for Renaissance English drama or writing—and binarized against other topics. In August 1642, for instance (as Robert Evans has pointed out), Thomas Trescott “apparently a Puritan minister [...]. Advised his audience (particularly magistrates) ‘To give over Ben, And Shakespeare, and fall upon Moses and the

⁴⁰ The *locus classicus* for this type of approach is Fuller's fantasy (reproduced in H&S XI, p. 510) of the tavern “*wit-combates*” between Jonson and Shakespeare: the former “like a *Spanish great Gallion* [...] built far higher in Learning; *Solid*, but *Slow* in his performances”; the latter, like “an English man of War [...] lesser in *bulk*, but lighter in *sailing*” and able to “turn with all tides, tack about and take advantage of all winds, by the quickness of his Wit and Invention”. The simile – which as Dutton has noted (“Jonson and Shakespeare”, pp. 141-2), casts the learning (as well, perhaps, as the pro-European leanings in Jonson's readings) as “foreign” against Shakespeare's native Englishness—is still widely visible in nineteenth-century accounts of Jonson, such as that by Thomas Carlyle (see H&S XI, pp. 567-8).

⁴¹ In a sense, the entire practice of judging poets in pairings had already been noticed and satirized from as early as Aristophanes' comedy *The Frogs* (c. 405 BC), in which—ironically enough for the case of Jonson and Shakespeare—Dionysus judges that the “weighty”, laboured verse of Aeschylus counts for more than the lighter, and intellectually more resilient verse of Euripides. The pairings of Jonson with Wither, Rudyerd, and Lovelace which we have observed in the current chapter offer a clear enough demonstration of the multiplicity of uses to which such antithetical constructions may be put. Dryden's imaging of Jonson as Virgil to Shakespeare's Homer offers another case in point (see H&S XI, p. 516).

Prophets, [and] to be better read in Saint Peter than in Sir Philip””.⁴² Here, linked with the radical Protestant, Sir Philip Sidney, what seems to be at stake is the sacralization of literary authorship which Trescott seems to intuit in the elevation of these writers to iconic status, and his consequent attempt to preserve them within the domain of the prophane. That Jonson was alert to the dangers of adulation is evident in his hedged acknowledgement concerning Shakespeare that “I lov’d the man, and doe honour his memory (on this side Idolatry) as much as any”.⁴³ But the tendency to idolize (through acts of apotheosis) and to stylize (through reductive representation)—as Bent Sørensen has shown in his acute study of images in contemporary culture—remain the constitutive impulses behind the creation of cultural icons;⁴⁴ and it is perhaps unsurprising that the literary reputations of both Shakespeare and Jonson were not immune to the same forces.

As a closing demonstration of this point, it may briefly be worth pausing to consider the case of a story constructed almost three hundred years after Jonson’s death, Rudyard Kipling’s late tale “Proofs of Holy Writ” (1934).⁴⁵ For here, in miniature, is crystallized out a powerful and considered response to the imagemes of Shakespeare and Jonson in the early twentieth century. The setting is New Place, Stratford, where a post-retirement Will sits, munching apples and gossiping about drama in the presence of a bulky, scarred, and increasingly drunken Ben. They are competitive, but clearly enjoy one another’s company, and the Ben who closes the story by chuckling at his snoozing companion “Mine earnest vehement botcher / And deacon also, Will, I cannot dispute with you”,⁴⁶ is certainly consistent with the poet who was to immortalize the bard after his death as “Not of an age, but for all time!”.⁴⁷ The King’s School images relating to Jonson’s scholarly importance (as well as his critical

⁴² Evans, “Jonsonian Allusions”, p. 240: citing evidence from J.M. Wasson, *Records of Early English Drama: Devon* (Toronto, 1986), p. 206.

⁴³ *Discoveries*, H&S VIII, pp. 583-4, ll. 654-5.

⁴⁴ See Bent Sørensen, “Sacred and Profane Icon-Work: Jane Fonda and Elvis Presley”, in W. Hölbling, K. Rieser and S. Rieser (eds), *US Icons and Iconicity* (Austria, 2006), pp. 237-57.

⁴⁵ Reprinted in *Rudyard Kipling: Stories and Poems*, ed. with an introduction by Roger Lancelyn Green (1970; rpt. London, 1976), pp. 178-88.

⁴⁶ Kipling, “Proofs”, p. 188.

⁴⁷ *Ungathered Verse* XXVI, H&S VIII, p. 391, l. 43.

approach to contemporary theatre) are also recapitulated in Kipling's narrative. The centrepiece of the story, however, does not lie in Kipling's considerable knowledge of Jonson's uneasy relationship with the stage or his classicism. Rather—in what is, perhaps, a somewhat unexpected twist—the author ups the ante by introducing a messenger who brings a translation of the latest instalment of the King James Bible, which Shakespeare has been secretly polishing for “Miles Smith of Brazen Nose College”,⁴⁸ and Will and Ben set in to checking it together. However, in line with Swinburne's famous distinction between the giants of energy and invention and the gods of harmony and creation (with Jonson as the giant and Shakespeare as the god),⁴⁹ Kipling's Jonson restricts himself to the odd philological observation or explication of the Latin source text. Shakespeare, on the other hand, begins to take off. In a manner which, today, may seem as redolent of Pullman as it is of Plato, the Bard calls upon his “Demon” for inspiration of a less earth-bound variety.⁵⁰ And it comes, imbuing the Biblical text with the magic of poetry. What appears to be going on, then, is a process of apotheosis in which Shakespeare becomes at one with the language of divine inspiration, while Jonson (surely at least a saint in this scenario), is also allowed to partake of the creative process.⁵¹ What Kipling has created is an act of communion in which the reader is invited as a celebrant.

As key elements in the communication of authorial reputation, the Jonsonian images and anecdotes that I have been examining above clearly deserve recognition within the literary-communicational theories which form a central point of focus for the present collection (as well as finding further points of reconciliation with them). The best way to achieve these aims, I would suggest, may be to reconceptualize these fragments of the Jonsonian imageme as early varieties of what are

⁴⁸ Kipling, “Proofs”, p. 180.

⁴⁹ Swinburne's comment may be found in the opening lines of his pioneering re-evaluation – *A Study of Ben Jonson* [1889] – rpt. in *The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, eds Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise, vol. 12 (London, 1926), pp. 1-124.

⁵⁰ Kipling, “Proofs” p. 183.

⁵¹ From another angle, this deification may be viewed as little more than an extension of the impulse towards the ennobling of Shakespeare's bloodline which has impacted so heftily on his literary reputation (and which Jonathan Bate has done so much to combat).

nowadays known as *avatars*—the icons which web users create to represent themselves on the internet. The avatar is, in effect, a simplification (and, to some extent, an idealization) of aspects of the self which are to be projected into the aether.⁵² It is often fairly consistent in its behaviour (and, indeed, users sometimes create different avatars to play out contrasting aspects of their personalities): although, for the case of literary identity, it needs to preserve a set of minimal features drawn from the cache of cultural memory in order to remain recognizable. What, in terms of literary communication, the avatar does is that it acts as a point of mediation between the detritus left behind by the life of an author, the “projector” who has reconstituted it for particular reasons within a particular temporal and geographical context, and the receivers: who are free to empathize, sympathize or antipathize with the presented avatar, creating (or reinforcing) their own communities of assent or dissent in reaction to it.⁵³

Such communities are always in negotiation with the *imageme*, creating their own avatars to redirect the forces of cultural memory along the lines of their present interests. For their purposes, the contingencies of Jonson’s rise to fame and the literary reputation that he managed to create in his lifetime are plain different things—much of which (for material reasons) must now remain inaccessible to us. So, in some respects it may be a lack rather than a plenitude of detailed knowledge which ends up being the most creative force in the formation of a new avatar (possibly because it leaves room for new generations to project aspects of themselves onto the inherited literary image). The *carte blanche* afforded by absence is perhaps nowhere displayed more prominently than it is for the case of Shakespeare, whose slender factual biography has enabled some four hundred years of commentators to mould his life into almost any image which they saw fit. The avatars of Shakespeare’s literary reputation—barber, lawyer, traveller,

⁵² Etymologically (from Hindu mythology), they represent the descent of a deity to earth in incarnate form (OED, 1).

⁵³ Perhaps the tightest formulation of the different forces at play here may be found in Sell, *Literature as Communication*, pp. 253-4. Linking this idea more closely to the same author’s closing lines on Wordsworth in the present collection, we might even go so far as to posit Sell’s proposed “Wordsworthian alter egos” as authorial avatars, held together within the wider *imagemic* domain of Wordsworth’s moderating voice.

cryptographer, aristocrat, proto-romantic “genius” along (as Schoenbaum’s studies have revealed) with an extensive gallery of others—have filled in the gaps in his life which have almost invariably accentuated the bonds between the bard and the particular interest group involved in the creation of the avatar.⁵⁴ With respect to Jonson, the situation is rather different, simply because so much is already known of parts of his personal life,⁵⁵ and it may be for this reason that readers have occasionally turned to his missing works to flesh out his image. (That an early play like *The Isle of Dogs*, for instance, has not come down to us is in large part because of its scandalous presence among his contemporaries: a presence which precipitated the impounding of all copies, the arrest and imprisonment of the playwright and actors; not to mention an attempt by the City Fathers to legislate a permanent closing of the theatres which, if successful, would have foreclosed the career of Shakespeare and a great deal of what is now remembered as a high point in the history of English drama. On the other hand, the absence of the play itself—in cahoots with the resonance of its surviving name—has proven itself to be a potent force for the resurfacing of the playwright as Katie Kingshill demonstrated in her own *Isle of Dogs* of 1999 at the Cochrane Theatre, Holborn: a play which—cognizant of Jonson’s stroke, and sympathetic to an equal policy for handicapped actors—portrayed the aged dramatist in a wheelchair looking back and remembering his youth.)

Patriarch, European, Londoner, classicist, poet, playwright, artisan, soldier, duellist, *bon viveur*, invalid: contemporary notions of the fragmented or divided self accord comfortably with the traces which survive of Jonson’s often gloriously uneven character and output. Far from being dead, the author has been cloned or reconstituted, or mutated in a series of images which, rather than being unrelated to his texts,

⁵⁴ See particularly Samuel Schoenbaum’s *Shakespeare’s Lives* (Oxford, 1970), and *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (Oxford, 1975).

⁵⁵ Even for Ben’s early contemporaries, the knowledge that he had played the part of Hieronymo in Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (even writing additions to the work) created space for satiric representations of Jonson as an actor. For Shakespeare, the absence of biographical data has, as I have already suggested, led to a huge number of ambitious (though largely unwarranted) attempts to extrapolate the life from the works: some of the most notorious examples of which may well be found in the studies of A.L. Rowse.

interact with them: helping to produce new conditions for their ongoing reception. It remains a tribute to the breadth of Jonson's achievement (both as a personality and a writer) that so many focal points from the Jonsonian image—many avatars of Jonson—have continued to communicate so powerfully in the twenty-first century.